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Politeness Strategies in Jacinda Ardern's 2020 Victory Speech: Constructing Political Leadership during Crisis

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Abstract

Political leaders employ language not only to convey political messages but also to establish public trust, reinforce collective identity, and legitimize leadership, particularly during periods of national crisis. This study examines the politeness strategies and their communicative functions employed in Jacinda Ardern's victory speech following the 2020 New Zealand general election by using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to explain how politeness serves as a communicative resource for constructing political leadership and fostering public trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to identify the types of politeness strategies used by Ardern regarding the revelation of the communication goals in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study examined 46 utterances using a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of pragmatic discourse analysis, with frequency counts and percentages serving as descriptive support for interpreting the distribution of identified strategies rather than for statistical inference or hypothesis testing. According to the findings, the most common strategy is positive politeness (50%), which is followed by bald-on-record (30.4%), off-record (17.4%), and negative politeness (2.2%). The predominance of positive politeness indicates that Ardern strategically constructs solidarity, strengthens collective identity, and cultivates public trust while addressing citizens during the period of national uncertainty. Bald-on-record strategies, on the other hand, were mainly employed to explicitly state a political commitment; off-record strategies used metaphorical phrases to express hope and resilience; and negative politeness demonstrated respect and humility. These results imply that politeness serves as a means of communication for political leadership in times of crisis in addition to being an interpersonal language strategy.

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Introduction

During a campaign or any political event, giving a speech is an essential activity for a politician as it gives them a platform to express their aspirations and establish communication in front of the public (Fauzan, 2022). In order to effectively engage the citizens, political leaders strategically employ language with rhetorical strategies particularly ethos, pathos, and logos in their speeches. These strategies are used not only to communicate political agendas, but also to shape social reality, reinforce dominant ideologies (Azmi, 2025), legitimize power relations (Azmi, 2025; Contesa & Surwandono, 2024), establish credibility, foster public trust, and reinforce collective identity, particularly during periods of social and political uncertainty (Firmansyah & Fadhurrahman, 2026; Purnamasari et al., 2025). Accordingly, political speech has become a prominent object of linguistic inquiry, particularly within pragmatics, as it reflects how language is strategically employed to achieve political and social objectives. Such speeches are not simply compilations of informative assertions but rather strategic communicative acts wherein political leaders meticulously utilize the linguistic resource to navigate authority, solidarity, persuasion, and respect to attain particular interpersonal and political objectives. According to Yulina *et al.,* (2021), prior critical discourse research has demonstrated that linguistic choices in political texts contribute to the construction of particular ideological perspectives and social meanings. Building upon these viewpoints, the current study explores how politeness strategies serve as communicative tools for building political leadership rather than merely managing interpersonal face.

In this context, politeness is relevant not only because it helps speakers minimize face-threatening acts and maintain interpersonal relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1987), but also it may help political leaders establish rapport with citizens, express appreciation, and create a sense of shared identity. Pragmatically, politeness is a linguistic phenomenon that shows awareness of another person's public self-image (Yule, 1996) that can be cultivated in social distance situations or proximity. In addition, the use of proper language here may refer to how the speaker positions themselves (Zhang & Lei, 2023), as it clearly can be observed within their language use; e.g., the language used by the speaker is formal and indirect, which may show his relationship with the listener is not close. Otherwise, when the speaker uses language informally and directly, his relationship with the listener is close enough (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 2013). This concept is linear with Yule's (1996) explanation about politeness: when the relationship seems socially distant, people practice respectful action; meanwhile, when people show awareness of someone close to them, it shows friendliness and solidarity.

The concept of "face" proposed by Goffman (1955, 1967) describes a person's public self-image. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face is categorized into two complementary dimensions: negative face (which represents the need for autonomy and freedom from imposition) and positive face (which expresses a person's need to be valued, accepted, and approved by others). Since face-threatening acts (FTAs) are an inevitable part of everyday communication, speakers constantly manage interpersonal connections by selecting linguistic strategies that minimize potential threats to their own or the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014). FTA is an utterance or action that threatens a person's public self-image (face) (Aridah, 2001; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Before choosing the best communicative strategy, speakers must take into account contextual factors including social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition because FTAs can occur in almost any communicative scenario (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Aporbo et al., 2024).

The consequence of this action causes people to consider whether they need to do the FTA or not since doing the FTA or not

depends on the situation whether a speaker wants to preserve the relationship with the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose five super-strategies to mitigate FTAs, namely bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and avoiding the FTA altogether. Each strategy demonstrates how to accomplish the speaker's communication objectives while shielding the hearer's face in a unique way. Bald-on-record is a politeness strategy that uses direct and explicit communication with little to no redressive action through straightforward, clear and unambiguous speech. Next, positive politeness is more emphasizing solidarity through common identity and mutual cooperation. On the other hand, negative politeness minimizes pressure by expressing humility, deference and indirectness. Meanwhile, off-record lessens communication accountability through implicitness, ambiguity, or inference (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Aridah, 2001). Thus, politeness is not merely a matter of linguistic etiquette but a pragmatic strategy through which speakers maintain interpersonal relationships while accomplishing their communicative goals (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983, 2014).

The politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson's theories actually have been extensively applied in various communicative contexts, including students' short message service (SMS) to lecturers (Wardhono, 2013), classroom interaction (Aporbo et al., 2024), social media communication (Onwubiko, 2020), negotiation dialogues (Terada et al., 2021), and movie conversations (Pratiwi et al., 2018; Septiyani, 2016). Many studies show that Brown and Levinson's theory is applicable to different types of written and spoken discourse, revealing how speakers strategically employ politeness to minimize face-threatening behaviors, maintain interpersonal relationships, and negotiate social distance. Additionally, by investigating the sociological elements influencing speakers' linguistic choices, such as social distance, relative power, and the ranking of imposition, several research projects have expanded the investigation beyond the identification of politeness techniques (Septiyani, 2016). In more recent times, politeness theory has been applied to political discourse. Prior research has examined politeness strategies in political speeches by prominent figures like Joe Biden (Purba et al., 2023), Barack Obama (Simangunsong et al., 2024; Sari, 2016), Sadiq Khan (Firman & Indrawan, 2025), Donald Trump, and Kamala Harris (Rahmadina, 2025). Besides that, politeness strategy has been used to compare political speeches from the United States and Britain in Phúc & Yến (2016). In summary, these studies indicate that while impoliteness and bald-on-record strategies are frequently linked to authority, confrontation, and power negotiation, positive politeness is frequently used by political leaders to build solidarity, improve public trust, and strengthen persuasive communication.

Despite these contributions, the majority of earlier research mostly focused on identifying the types, prevalences, or the dominant politeness strategies utilized in political discourse. Furthermore, some studies have compared the communication styles of various political figures (Rahmadina, 2025; Phúc & Yén, 2016) or examined the sociological factors influencing speakers' linguistic choices (Septiyani, 2016).

Jacinda Ardern, as one of the most well-known female political leaders and one of the youngest politicians in New Zealand, was specifically chosen by the researchers because she has attracted scholarly attention (McGuire et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2022; Sartika et al., 2025) for her relational, inclusive and sympathetic communication style; as a result, her speeches are extremely relevant for examining the connection between politeness and political leadership. Moreover, victory speech is commonly analyzed since it offers a rich domain for pragmatic analysis, as they constitute unique political events that bring together national recovery and electoral legitimacy. Further, the researcher chose Arden’s victory speech in 2020 during COVID-19 period because the speech offers a particular context on how politeness strategies function beyond interpersonal interactions, simultaneously celebrating electoral success, bolstering national solidarity, reassuring citizens in the face of uncertainty, and promoting trust in

governmental leadership during a national emergency.

Prior research has examined at Jacinda Ardern's communication style from a number of different perspectives, including pragmatics, political leadership, persuasive discourse, and crisis communication. For example, McGuire et al. (2020) examined 40 speeches and public declarations made by Ardern in the early phases of the COVID-19 epidemic, emphasizing the importance of empathetic communication, public participation, and consistent message in building trust and social solidarity. Similarly, Beattie and Priestley (2021) examined Ardern's daily press briefings during New Zealand's 2020 lockdown and identified three prominent communicative features that demonstrate the significance of Ardern's communication in mobilizing collective action and building public trust during a public health crisis: (1) open and straightforward communication, (2) distinctive and motivational language, and (3) expressions of care.

Other studies have explored the relationship between Ardern's language use and political leadership. Sartika et al. (2025) analyzed Arden's six speeches delivered following the 2019 church-mosque attacks, and its findings identified transparency and compassion, clarity and decisiveness, and motivational discourse as key persuasive strategies in Ardern's communication during crises. From a pragmatic perspective, *Vincent et al.* (2023) examined directive speech acts in the COVID-19 briefings of Ardern and three other political leaders and the findings indicated that Ardern frequently employed indirect directives, while also using imperatives selectively. Collectively, these studies have contributed to understanding how Ardern's communication conveys empathy, encourages collective participation, and negotiates authority in politically and socially challenging circumstances.

Prior research on Jacinda Ardern has mostly focused on her communication in relation to crisis management, public health communication, persuasive speech, and political leadership. These studies have provided the spotlight on Ardern's persuasive language, empathetic communication, and public engagement techniques, but they haven't particularly examined how politeness strategies function in her speech from the perspective of political leadership. Further research is required to comprehend how positive politeness functions in this political setting to strengthen leadership legitimacy, foster public trust, and build collective identity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, while earlier research on speeches has been successful in identifying the prevalence and distribution of politeness techniques in political speeches, it mostly views politeness as a linguistic classification rather than a communicative tool for building political leadership. Although the present study also identifies and classifies politeness strategies, it goes beyond classification by examining how these strategies function as communicative resources for constructing political leadership in the specific context of Jacinda Ardern's 2020 election victory speech. Also, there has been comparatively little focus on elucidating why certain politeness strategies are strategically used in particular political contexts and how these strategies serve as communicative tools for building political leadership, cultivating public trust, and bolstering leadership legitimacy during times of national crisis such as COVID-19. Consequently, politeness in political discourse has largely been interpreted from a linguistic classification perspective rather than as a strategic communicative resource in political leadership.

Addressing this gap, unlike previous studies that mainly classify politeness strategies or compare their frequency across political figures, the present study investigates the politeness strategies employed in Jacinda Ardern's 2020 New Zealand General Election victory speech using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory from the perspective of political leadership. Specifically, it examines how politeness strategies may contribute to constructing collective identity, strengthening public trust, and reinforcing leadership legitimacy, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study

extends the application of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory beyond interpersonal interaction, by demonstrating how politeness functions as a communicative resource in political communication and leadership style during crisis. Thus, by showing how politeness serves as a communicative resource in political communication and leadership style under crises, this study expands the application of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory beyond interpersonal contact. This study aims to: (1) identify the politeness strategies used in Jacinda Ardern's 2020 New Zealand General Election victory speech; and (2) investigate how, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, positive politeness contributes to the construction of collective identity, public trust, and leadership legitimacy.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of pragmatic discourse analysis to investigate the politeness strategies employed in Jacinda Ardern's victory speech following the 2020 New Zealand General Election, with frequency counts and percentages serving as descriptive support for interpreting the distribution of identified strategies rather than for statistical inference or hypothesis testing. The investigation emphasized how politeness strategies functioned within the larger socio-political context of New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic rather than just identifying linguistic forms. The data consisted of the transcript of Jacinda Ardern's victory speech delivered after the 2020 New Zealand General Election, which was retrieved from the Rev transcription website that provides publicly accessible verbatim transcripts of public speeches. The speech was selected because it was delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which political leaders were required not only to announce electoral success or policy implementation but also to reassure citizens, strengthen national solidarity, and reinforce public trust; thus, the speech provides a relevant context for examining the role of politeness strategies in political communication during a national crisis. Since the goal of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of how politeness strategies operate within naturally occurring political speech rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal correlations, a qualitative descriptive approach was deemed appropriate. Pragmatic discourse analysis is especially beneficial for studying political speeches because it allows academics to glean information at language choices on the basis of their communicative goals and sociopolitical context.

In this study, the data source was a transcript of a speech by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during her election-winning year, 2020. The researcher collected the data from Rev's Website (Rev, 2020) that provided a paid transcription service. Fortunately, the speech transcription of Jacinda Ardern was available for free on their website. After collecting the data, the researcher put each sentence of the speech into a table. Initially, 49 utterances were identified from Ardern's 2020 victory speech. After reviewing their relevance to the research objectives, three were excluded due to insufficient pragmatic content, leaving 46 utterances as the final dataset for politeness strategy analysis. The data was then identified and categorized using politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

The data analysis followed four stages: (1) repeated reading of the transcript (the transcript was read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization and to understand its communicative context); (2) speech segmentation (utterances containing face-threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies were identified, each serving as the unit of analysis); (3) utterance analysis (a deductive coding procedure was conducted using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, whereby each utterance was classified into one of the five politeness strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, or avoiding the face-threatening act); (4) final interpretation (the coded data were interpreted by relating the identified strategies to the communicative purposes of the speech in relation to political leadership, public trust, and crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic). Although the

frequency of each strategy was calculated to identify dominant patterns, the primary focus of the analysis was to interpret how politeness strategies functioned as communicative resources within the speech. However, this study examines four FTA-performing politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987): bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The analysis focuses on how these strategies are linguistically realized in the speaker's utterances, with the exclusion of the FTA-avoidance category because the study specifically investigates how politeness strategies are linguistically realized in the speaker's utterances when performing FTAs. Accordingly, the analysis concentrates on identifying and interpreting the four strategies within the selected speech excerpts.

The findings were qualitatively examined by analyzing how each politeness strategy contributed to communicative goals in Ardern's speech using a theory-driven content analysis approach based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Rather than being used for statistical analysis, quantitative frequency counts were solely utilized to support qualitative interpretation and identify distributional patterns, not for statistical analysis. As a result, numerical data served as further evidence to explain each politeness strategy's dominance and communication significance.

The study's major analytical focus remained qualitative even if the distribution of politeness methods was described using frequency counts and percentages. While the qualitative research involves analyzing selected speech excerpts on the basis of their linguistic features, communicative objectives, and sociopolitical context, the numerical results provided further descriptive evidence. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework as a guide, each interpretation examined how the suggested strategies might be used to project political leadership, demonstrate solidarity, and create a shared identity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rev (2020) is an online transcribing service from which the transcript was acquired.

Results and Discussion

Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, 46 utterances from Jacinda Ardern's 2020 victory speech were examined; Table 1 shows the distribution of the politeness strategies that were found.

As demonstrated in Table 1, positive politeness is the most frequently used politeness strategy employed by Ardern, comprising 23 utterances (50%) of the total data. The remaining politeness strategies include bald-on-record (30.4%), off-record (17.4%), and negative politeness (2.2%), as classified by Brown and Levinson (1987). This dominant use of positive politeness suggests her tendency to reduce social distance and promote solidarity with her audience.

Table 1. The Politeness Strategy Result

No.	Type of Politeness	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Positive Politeness	23	50.00
2	Bald on Record	14	30.40
3	Off Record	8	17.40
4	Negative Politeness	1	2.20
	Total	46	100

1. Positive Politeness

The predominance of positive politeness indicates that the speaker focused on the positive face of the hearer, as the speaker has the same intention as the hearer by treating the hearer as a group member (Brown & Levinson, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness emphasizes collective identity, fosters solidarity, and expresses acceptance in order to address the hearer's positive face. This strategy was frequently employed in Ardern's victory speech through expressions of appreciation, inclusive pronouns used, and optimistic projection for New Zealand's future.

The analysis uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) 15 positive politeness sub-strategies to examine how positive politeness was implemented in Ardern's victory speech. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), as cited in Wardhono (2013), there are 15 sub-strategies in positive politeness as follows: (1) Notice the hearer's (H's) interests, (2) exaggerate (interest approval, sympathy with H), (3) intensify interest to H, (4) use in-group identity markers, (5) seek agreement, (6) avoid disagreement, (7) assert common ground, (8) give jokes, (9) assert S's concern for H's wants, (10) give offer and promise, (11) be optimistic, (12) include both speaker (S) and hearer (H) in the activity, (13) give (or ask for) reasons, (14) assume or assert reciprocity, and (15) give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).

Selected excerpts from the speech are presented in the discussion subsequently to show how specific sub-strategies appeared in context. Instead of going over each of the 15 sub-strategies separately, the research concentrates on those that the data supports, considering their language characteristics and their communicative roles in fostering unity and a sense of shared identity between Ardern and the people of New Zealand.

1) *"But most importantly, thank you to the many people who gave **us** their vote, who trusted **us** to continue with leading New Zealand's recovery, who backed to the plan we are already rolling out."* (Excerpt 7)

As the newly elected leader of New Zealand, Ardern uses this statement to build a strong collaborative relationship with the public. Ardern did not only acknowledge the citizens' trust, but also expressed appreciation for their support (sub-strategy 15: giving gifts).

2) *"I hope that this election, New Zealand has shown that this is not who **we** are."* (Excerpt 14)
3) *"That as a nation, **we** can listen and **we** can debate."* (Excerpt 15)
4) "*After all, **we** are small to lose sight of other people's perspective." (*Excerpt 16)
5) *"As a nation, **we** needed a plan for recovery." (*Excerpt 23)
6) *"This is **our** opportunity to build an economy that works for everyone."* (Excerpt 32)
7) *"That light has been **our** nation's determination, **our** support for one another, **our** sense of resolve."* (Excerpt 42)
8) "So, let's step forward together." (Excerpt 48)

On top of that, by repeatedly using the pronoun 'we' and 'us' in several excerpts, she depicts the citizens as crucial and active partners in the effort of recovering New Zealand (sub-strategy 4: using in-group identity marker; sub-strategy 12: including both the speaker & the hearer in the activity). These inclusive pronouns construct a shared national identity (i.e. Excerpt 14), emphasize collective values and solidarity (i.e., Excerpt 15 and 42), frame recovery as a collective responsibility (i.e. Excerpt 23), and encourage the nation to move forward together (i.e. Excerpt 48).

In addition, in Excerpt 7, rather than portraying electoral victory as an individual achievement, Ardern constructs a collaborative relationship between the government and its citizens to share collective identity and foster solidarity (sub-strategy 7: asserting common ground); such expressions of appreciation contribute to positive face enhancement by making voters feel valued and recognized and this strategy can strengthen public trust in governmental leadership while reducing social distance

between political leaders and the general public during a period of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

9) *"We will govern as we campaigned, positively with optimism about our future, with a relentless focus on a recovery that brings New Zealanders with us to deliver long lasting change." (Excerpt 46)*

A similar pattern appears in Excerpt 46: the phrase "New Zealanders" and the inclusive pronouns "we" and "our" are frequently used to create a collective identity marker that portrays the government and people as collaborators working toward shared national objectives (sub-strategy 4 and 12). One of the identity markers done by Ardern is presenting national recovery as a shared duty that requires collective engagement rather than focusing on political authority (sub-strategy 7). By portraying political leadership as cooperative rather than hierarchical, this strategy increases the legitimacy of leadership. The phrase "positively with optimism about our future" (sub-strategy 11: being optimistic) expresses a positive outlook for the country. Meanwhile, "we will govern as we campaigned" (sub-strategy 14: assuming reciprocity) may suggest consistency between campaign commitments and future governance. The phrase "to deliver long lasting change" expresses a goal, but does not by itself establish a promise unless the surrounding context supports that interpretation (sub-strategy 10: giving offers or promises).

Overall, the quantitative distribution shows that Ardern's discourse is dominated by positive politeness, indicating that solidarity-building takes precedence over authority assertion. Based on the analysis of the selected Excerpts, the most supported sub-strategies are the use of in-group identity markers (sub-strategy 4), asserting common ground (sub-strategy 7), being optimistic (sub-strategy 11), and including both the speaker and the hearer in the activity (sub-strategy 12). These sub-strategies are reflected in Ardern's use of inclusive pronouns ("we," "our," and "us"), references to New Zealanders as members of a shared national community, expressions of optimism about the country's future, and the presentation of national recovery as a collective responsibility.

Through inclusive linguistic choices, Ardern continuously presented herself as a member of the national collective rather than using institutional power. The high level of positive politeness shows that Ardern purposefully used inclusive language to promote unity and bolster public confidence during the COVID-19 outbreak. This result is consistent with earlier research showing that positive politeness predominates in political victory speeches (Purba et al., 2023; Simangunsong et al., 2024). However, the current study shows that positive politeness also serves as a communicative resource for building political leadership and bolstering public trust during times of national crises, in contrast to earlier research that mostly focused on the prevalence of politeness strategies.

As mentioned before, from 15 positive politeness sub-strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), Ardern employed the use of in-group identity markers, asserting common ground, expressing optimism, offering promises, and including both the speaker and the hearer in the activity, all of which are intended to reduce social distance and strengthen interpersonal relationships. In Ardern's victory speech, these sub-strategies are predominantly realized through expressions of gratitude, inclusive pronouns (us, we, and our), references to New Zealanders, optimistic commitments, and shared goals or responsibility for national recovery. Instead of emphasizing institutional power, she repeatedly reduces the symbolic distance between political elites and ordinary citizens through inclusive pronouns and shared national goals. Since citizens are portrayed as cooperative partners rather than merely passive recipients of policies, such linguistic choices enhance leadership legitimacy.

2. Bald on Record

Bald-on-record is the second most common strategy used by Ardern, occurring in 14 utterances (30.4%). Bald-on-record does not simply refer to the politeness

strategy without taking redressive action, but it is characterized by direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise language that minimizes face-redressive actions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, Bald-on-record is a strategy in which the speaker performs an FTA directly and explicitly without employing redressive action to mitigate the potential threat to the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Such directness and straightforward communication reduce ambiguity in political discourse and allows leader to make pledges & obligations clear. Excerpt 8 and 10 below are examples of the use of bald-on-record strategies.

1) *"And to those amongst you who may not have supported Labour before and the results tell me there were a few of you."* (Excerpt 8)

2) "*We will not take your support for granted."* (Excerpt 10)

The 2020 general election marked a significant development in New Zealand's electoral history. Since the introduction of the Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system in 1996, no single party had previously secured an outright parliamentary majority. In the 2020 election, the Labour Party won 65 of the 120 seats, enabling it to form a single-party majority government. Although Labour had governed New Zealand before, its 2020 victory was the first time a party achieved an outright majority under the MMP system (New Zealand Parliamentary Library, 2021). This electoral context is relevant to understanding Ardern's acknowledgment of voters who had not previously supported Labour, as her victory speech addressed an electorate with diverse political preferences.

In Excerpt 8, Ardern directly addresses audience members who may not have previously supported the Labour Party. As a result, rather than avoiding political differences, she directly recognizes the existence of opposition and voters that may have supported other parties, demonstrating transparency immediately after the election by specifically addressing the voters who most likely favor a different party that has consistently won in the past. This direct acknowledgment contributes to the legitimacy of her leadership by recognizing the diversity of political preferences among New Zealanders. This acknowledgment may pose a mild threat to the hearers' positive face because it identifies them as individuals who were previously outside Labour's support base. Nevertheless, Ardern addresses these voters directly without criticizing or blaming them for their previous political choices. The utterance can therefore be interpreted as a relatively direct, on-record acknowledgment of political differences. Its bald-on-record interpretation rests on the explicit recognition of this difference rather than on an assumption that directness alone constitutes an FTA. In this context, bald-on-record may serve as a means of communicating with the public, but its impact on public trust cannot be determined only by the speech's language. Besides, this strategy could build trust from the citizens, as she told the audience clearly and directly that she wanted to convince those people to believe in her work and she did not want those people to misinterpret her good deeds in the speech. Those bald-on-record strategies used declarative statements that express a straightforward commitment without hedging or indirectness.

In Excerpt 10, Ardern states, "we will not take your support for granted." The declarative statement directly communicates a commitment to value the support she has received. As the recently elected prime minister, Ardern communicated accountability and responsibility by clearly assuring the public that their trust would not be taken for granted. By being straightforward, she reduced doubt about her political commitment and boosted public trust in the incoming administration.

When taken as a whole, these instances collectively show that bald-on-record was used in Ardern's speech to clearly and transparently convey political commitment rather than to assert power. In contrast, Rahmadina (2025) discovered that domination was often linked to direct techniques, as if in Donald Trump's political rhetoric. Ardern, on the other hand, utilized

directness in order to promote democratic leadership and accountability.

3. Off Record

Based on the findings, off-record strategy occurs in eight utterances (17.4%). In contrast to a bald-on-record strategy, off-record allows the speaker to speak indirectly and use ambiguous language such as metaphors, irony, rhetorical questions, or tautologies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as it relies on indirectness, implication, and figurative language, allowing speakers to communicate messages while leaving room for audience interpretation. Brown and Levinson (1987) also added that to some degree, and this strategy aims to make the meaning negotiable. The off-record strategy comprises 16 sub-strategies, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely (1) giving hints, (2) giving association clues, (3) presupposing, (4) understating, (5) overstating, (6) using tautologies, (7) contradicting, (8) being ironic, (9) using metaphors, (10) using rhetorical questions, (11) being ambiguous, (12) being vague, (13) over-generalizing, (14) displacing the hearer, (15) being incomplete, and (16) using ellipsis.

The following analysis examines the eight utterances identified as off-record in Ardern's victory speech, focusing on the sub-strategies reflected in the data. Selected excerpts are presented to illustrate how these sub-strategies are realized in context.

1) *"The last few have not been easy either, but there have **been chinks of light** that have shown through even **the darkest of times**."* (Excerpt 41)
2) "*That **light** has been our nation's determination, our support for one another, **our sense of resolve**."* (Excerpt 42)
3) *"And we set out to be **an antidote** to that."* (Excerpt 22)
4) *"...**turn** all of the uncertainty and hard times **into** cause for hope and optimism."* (Excerpt 32)

These excerpts use metaphors (sub-strategy 9) to communicate ideas through figurative language. In Excerpt 41, "chinks of light" and "the darkest of times" represent hope and hardship. In Excerpt 42, "light" symbolizes the nation's determination and mutual support. In Excerpt 22, "an antidote" metaphorically presents Labour as a response to public uncertainty and anxiety, allowing the audience to interpret the party's political role through the association with an antidote. Meanwhile, in Excerpt 32, the phrase "turn all of the uncertainty and hard times into cause for hope and optimism" is a metaphor for turning challenging situations into favorable results. It implies that New Zealand's problems might be reframed as chances to create a more optimistic future.

In excerpt 41, Ardern's use of the metaphor "chinks of light" represents moments of hope during the pandemic. By applying this figurative language, she highlighted optimism and emotional recovery instead of directly asserting her governmental achievement, which allowed the audiences to see 'hope' as a shared experience. Meanwhile, "the darkest of times" depicts hardship as extreme darkness. This latter point can also be interpreted as an overstatement (sub-strategy 5: overstating), as it reinforces the portrayal of past hardships. Such expressions allow Ardern to communicate the contrast between adversity and hope through figurative language, rather than relying on literal descriptions of specific experiences. These metaphors are further developed in the following utterance (Excerpt 42), in which 'light' symbolizes the citizens' hope, collective resilience, and solidarity. Instead of explicitly and directly presenting the government's success in handling the COVID-19 case in May 2020, she emphasizes the collective determination in the nation's recovery.

This discussion on Excerpt 41 indicates that Ardern avoided claiming the governmental success; instead, she employed metaphorical language, providing room for multiple interpretations. Besides that, from Excerpt 41 & 42, the metaphors provide an indirect means of presenting the country's progress and inviting the audience to construct the intended meaning from the shared experience of the crisis. Furthermore, in Excerpt 22, instead of explicitly identifying or criticizing the individuals responsible,

Ardern conveys her evaluation through metaphorical language, allowing the audience to infer the underlying criticism and understand Labour's intended role as a corrective alternative.

Such indirectness enables audiences to participate in constructing meaning, thereby increasing emotional engagement without overt political persuasion. In a nutshell, by using an off-record strategy, the speaker is able to take some pressure off the hearer. As a result, strategy functions not only to mitigate face-threatening acts but also to strengthen emotional engagement and collective resilience during a national crisis.

5) *"And that **light** has always been more powerful than the most overwhelming darkness."* (Excerpt 43)

In Excerpt 43, the contrast between "light" and "darkness" metaphorically represents hope and adversity (sub-strategy 9). The expressions "always been more powerful" and "most overwhelming darkness" may constitute overstatement (sub-strategy 5: overstating) because they emphasize the strength of hope and the intensity of hardship in absolute terms.

6) *"Elections aren't always great at bringing people together, but they also don't need to **tear one another apart."*** (Excerpt 17)

In Excerpt 17, the expression "tear one another apart" metaphorically represents political division (sub-strategy 9). Ardern draws a distinction between the premise that elections don't have to cause division and the potential that they fail to bring people together. The audience is prompted to think about a less combative approach to political dispute by this contrast. However, in Brown and Levinson's approach, the contrast by itself does not always constitute the contradictory sub-strategy (sub-strategy 7).

7) *"Now more than ever is the time to keep going, to keep working, to grab **hold** of the opportunities that **lay** in front of us."* (Excerpt 47)

In Excerpt 47, the expression "now more than ever" intensifies the urgency of continued effort and may be interpreted as overstatement (sub-strategy 5). Meanwhile, "grab hold of the opportunities" is metaphorical (sub-strategy 9).

Excerpt 47 employs the metaphor strategy (sub-strategy 9) through the phrase "to grab hold of the opportunities that lay in front of us," which metaphorically presents opportunities as objects that can be physically grasped, leaving the specific nature of these opportunities open to the audience's interpretation.

8) *"We know the next few years will not be easy."* (Excerpt 40)

Ardern acknowledges future difficulties without specifying their nature or extent. In the context of New Zealand's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the audience may interpret these difficulties as economic, social, or other national challenges. However, the central message remains direct, so the lack of specificity alone does not establish an off-record strategy.

In Excerpt 40, Ardern was ambiguous by mentioning the word '*easy*.' It is unclear what kind of difficulties New Zealanders probably face in the next few years as in the context of New Zealand's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the audience may interpret these difficulties as economic, social, or other national challenges. By leaving the challenges unspecified, Ardern allowed the audience to interpret the statement in relation to the broader context of the speech. Thus, the utterance illustrates being vague (sub-strategy 12: being vague) because the specific challenges remain unstated, although the general message is clear.

4. Negative Politeness

Negative politeness is the least frequently employed strategy in Ardern's speech, as it only appeared once out of 46 sentences (2.2%). Negative politeness aims to avoid interfering with the hearer's freedom of action by minimizing imposition and expressing respect for the hearer's autonomy through deference, indirectness, mitigation, and other linguistic devices that reduce the

potential threat to the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this strategy, the speakers commonly communicate their needs by not burdening the hearer (Aridah, 2001), as it is not merely expressed through formal language; rather, it conveys respect, humility, and an effort to avoid imposing the speaker's authority or intentions on the hearer. Negative politeness is illustrated by "*Would you please close the door?*" reducing the face threat by weakening the imposition force (Leech, 2014). As cited in Wardhono (2013), some sub-strategies of negative politeness include (1) being conventionally indirect, (2) questions and hedge, (3) being pessimistic, (4) minimizing imposition, (5) giving deference, (6) apologizing, (7) impersonally addressing S and H, (8) stating the FTA as a general rule, (9) nominalizing, or (10) going on record as incurring debt or as not indebting H (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Among these, the utterance that is analyzed in this study primarily realizes the sub-strategy of *giving deference* as seen in Excerpt 45.

1) *"...and I cannot imagine a people I would feel more privileged to work on behalf of, to work alongside, and to be Prime Minister for."* (Excerpt 45)

In Excerpt 45, Ardern employs deferential expressions (sub-strategy 5: giving deference) through the phrases "I would feel more privileged," "work on behalf of," and "work alongside" to convey humility and respect toward the people she represents. Rather than presenting her position as a source of authority, she portrays being Prime Minister as a privilege and a responsibility to serve New Zealanders. By emphasizing privilege and humility rather than authority, this statement demonstrates giving deference by acknowledging the importance of the people and positioning herself as a leader who works for and alongside them.

Even though she did not mention specific names of those people, she appreciated and honored the people who may help her as the prime minister. Somehow, she tried to emphasize that those people have the equal or higher status as her. Ardern portrayed political leadership as a form of service rather than imposing herself above general society. Such mitigation reflects negative politeness by minimizing social pressure while expressing appreciation toward those she represents.

Further, in this excerpt, she minimized the power or hierarchical distance between herself and the citizens by saying the expression "*work alongside*"; and she also did not emphasize her authority as the newly elected Prime Minister but instead portrayed leadership as a privilege and a form of public service rather than domination by saying the expressions *"I would feel more privileged"* and *"work on behalf of".* The utterances convey humility and respect toward the people she represented, as they are able to attend to the hearers' negative face by acknowledging their autonomy and dignity while presenting political leadership as collaborative rather than authoritative. By recognizing the hearers' autonomy and dignity, these linguistic choices address their negative face and lessen the possible imposition associated with political authority.

Although negative politeness was infrequently used by Ardern in her speech, its presence complemented the overall communicative style of the speech. Basically, a victory speech's main objectives are to celebrate election triumph, express gratitude, and promote solidarity among citizens, in contrast to official government announcements or policy addresses.

Thus, instead of relying on formal distance, Ardern primarily employs positive politeness to build solidarity, while selectively applying negative politeness to demonstrate humility and respect. These findings indicate that although negative politeness was used in a relatively minor role in the speeches, it complements Ardern's relational leadership style that was characterized by empathy, inclusivity and public engagement, by reinforcing the image of a leader who serves the society rather than merely exercises authority over them. Furthermore, instead of emphasizing her institutional authority, she presented herself as a leader working on the same goals alongside New Zealanders. Consequently, this finding indicates that politeness strategies in political discourse can

function as a strategic tool for establishing leadership, building public trust, and fostering collective engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From this study, politeness serves as a communicative tool for political leadership in addition to identifying the occurrence of politeness strategies. In particular, during a time of national crisis, Ardern deliberately used politeness to construct collective identity, reinforce leadership legitimacy, and foster public trust. This result is in line with the findings of Nursanti et al. (2026), who contend that contextual appropriateness and perceived politeness, rather than just formal linguistic correspondence, determine communicative effectiveness. This research then also validates Fairclough's (2013) theory that social identities and social relations are simultaneously constructed through political discourse. Hence, by presenting political leaders as members of the group rather than as detached authority figures, positive politeness serves both interpersonal and ideological aims. Further, while Yulina, Sudarna, & Handayani (2021) examined how linguistic resources represent ideological positioning within political news discourse, Ardern's predominance of positive politeness in her winning speech throughout the COVID-19 serves as an example of how linguistic choices contribute to constructing fostering public trust, strengthening collective identity, and leadership legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study examined the politeness strategies employed in Jacinda Ardern's 2020 victory speech using Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. From 46 utterances, Ardern used positive politeness at 50%, bald-on-record strategy at 30.4%, off-record strategy at 17.4% and negative politeness strategy only at 2.2%. It can be concluded that positive politeness was the most dominant strategy used, followed by bald-on-record strategy, off-record strategy and negative politeness. The predominance of positive politeness indicates that Ardern consistently employed inclusive and empathetic language to show her closeness with the citizens, construct solidarity, reduce social distance, and strengthen public trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, negative politeness demonstrated humility and respect by portraying leadership as public service rather than authority; off-record strategy allowed her to express hope and resilience through metaphorical language, and bald-on-record strategy was primarily used to communicate political commitment transparently.

Theoretically, by demonstrating how linguistic politeness enhances effective crisis communication and democratic leadership, these findings expand the application of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory from interpersonal communication to political discourse. Therefore, political politeness should be understood not merely as face management but also as an essential component of democratic crisis communication. Together, these findings suggest that linguistic choices simultaneously perform ideological and interpersonal functions in political communication.

However, this study has a number of limitations. It first concentrates on a single victory speech given by a single political figure in a particular national and electoral setting. As a result, the results could not accurately reflect the use of politeness techniques in other political speeches or sociopolitical contexts. Second, the analysis focuses on the linguistic features of the speech and ignores audience responses. When interpreting the results, these constraints should be taken into account. Future studies may examine political speeches across different leaders, crisis contexts, cultures, leadership style or political systems to compare how politeness strategies are employed in constructing leadership identities and managing public communication across various sociopolitical contexts and to determine whether solidarity-oriented discourse consistently contributes to public trust and political legitimacy.

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